

THE ORACLE. By HENRY NORMANBY.

A story in a peculiar vein of humour which will doubtless appeal to the taste of many of our readers, who have had several opportunities of judging work of a different kind by the same writer.



HE deferred to his judgment in everything—he was so young. We sat at his feet and gathered the crumbs of his wisdom wherewith to build up the fabric of our souls. His pronouncements at times almost staggered us. Objections were disposed of with such a largeness of dismissal. We quoted him as an appeal to the Prophets, and were rewarded with his smile. The smile itself was oracular, weighted with the immensity of his knowledge, deep and inscrutable as the sea. He spoke with grave deliberation, with a slowness and impressiveness which awed us, leaving a painful sense of the instability of things—a sense accentuated by the wreckage of our old-time beliefs and the abandonment of long-cherished ideals. He made not the least pretence of questioning the correctness of his own view, and that strength of conviction appealed to us. We should as soon have thought of doubting the Universe as of doubting him ; and only when the awakening came did we fully realise the enormity of our faith.

Even now, despite the lapse of the slow-marching years, his spirit rules us from its urn.

"Of me," asked the Oracle, "let it be said, not whispered" ; and, somehow, if, when speaking of him, we sink our voices, as one is wont to do when murmuring of the sublime, it seems an infidelity, a slight to his memory. The high privilege of seeing him many times was ours. We very literally sat at his feet, for his room was sparsely furnished, and the chairs, other than his own, did not allow of familiarities ; in fact, they were not to be trusted. A Spartan luxury was his. "Comfort," said he, "is a surrender to the material."

Wisdom fell from him like water from a great fountain—cool, sparkling, refreshing, and beautiful—scattering itself far and wide. It dazzled and delighted us, and we never tired of its gorgeous scintillations.

Speaking of the Modern Woman—and, curiously, his thoughts constantly wandered to the Golden-haired—he pronounced sentence : "She has elected to lead, and shall lead—to ultimate perdition." This utterance came back to us at length, stamped with the seal of his own fateful experience. Could it have been that he was prescient of Fate when he averred

that "Man, but for his soul, would be immortal"? Unlike our Master, we do not know.

One thing surprised and puzzled us; the Oracle wore a watch-chain, but no watch. Doubtless there was some mystic significance in this apparent capitulation to Respectability, but he never enlightened us, and we forbore to weakly inquire. Let the fact be recorded—the chain itself was fashioned of brass.

"Gold is for hirelings," quoth the Seer; "gingerbread is garnished therewith."

He quoted with approval Dr. Johnson's expressed dislike for clean linen: "I, also, have no passion for it; a stable whitewashed is but a stable."

His readiness to discuss any subject amazed us; he was genuinely surprised if anyone differed from him, but he never condescended to defend his own views. To his mind, as to ours, it was sufficient that he thought it; that anyone should think otherwise was the dissentient's misfortune. He was reticent as to his youth, yet must his up-bringing have been wonderful, since he himself has laid it down that "A lying child has evil parents." His ways were engagingly candid, but one thing he strictly enjoined on us—not to disclose his dwelling-place. To our inquiring looks he replied, "I have reasons." This we attributed to the modesty of genius, since palatial halls had been narrow to him. The judgment of Posterity may be severe, but neither he nor we shall be pained by it; yet, mayhap, Posterity will weep.

Concerning marriage and the relation of the sexes he was strangely silent. Once only we sought instruction at the fount of his wisdom.

"One woman," said he, "is insufficient; two excessive." Whereat a disciple, going the one-woman way, was emboldened to inquire, "Why insufficient?" and received reply, "Marriage is the ultimate outpost of sanity; to perish for one woman is to die without knowing." The disciple was enabled to save his reason—and his marriage fees.

Nevertheless the Oracle was profoundly learned in the ways of women, and deeply appreciative of feminine charms, as witness: "The smile of a woman is a hint of the possible," and again, "Eve lost her innocence but found her ankles," his pessimistic dicta being, "The confession of a woman is the essence of untruth," and "The sun dries oceans—and a woman's tears." That he was alive to the injustice meted out to her is shown by his deep utterance: "Woman, alone amongst animals, sins singly."

Athletics he utterly despised, holding that "brute force is the sign of the barbarian." This being a veracious history, let us add that he neglected his ablutions and was indifferent to the niceties of the toilet. We state these truths, not by way of criticism, but rather as a reproof to those who set store by such vanities. The pronouncement of the seer may suffice: "Soap is the symbol of a corrupt civilisation—the pure have no need of it; flowers are washed but with rain." The Oracle was a poet.

Once he was contradicted, and the memory of that moment even yet gives a catch to the breath. The subject under discussion was "The

Psychology of the Soul-less Woman," and the matter was settled, for he had spoken, when an old man arose, everything about him evidencing the extreme foolishness of age—a worn, grey, and wrinkled man who had lived long enough to forget, and not long enough to remember. The contradiction was flat and brutal; no apology softened its asperity, no modulation of tone soothed its aggression.

"I deny that; you are mistaken; it is absolutely wrong!"

We gazed at each other in amazement; we held our breath and waited. For a moment the Oracle gave no sign; then he smiled, and we were saved. No word was spoken, only that tranquil, sufficing, convincing smile. The patriarch was smitten as by a blow; he arose and went forth from amongst us, and was seen no more.

"To be infallible," said the Oracle, "is to respect Truth."

Our faith in him never faltered; we listened and believed, remembered and were at peace.

One afternoon in late autumn we crowded about him as was our wont, arduously climbing to the heights whereon he serenely wandered. A hush, solemn and awe-inspiring, fell upon us as he spoke; we stifled the slightest sound lest some harmonious note fell unheeded from his lips.

"Woman," said the Oracle, "is, while man may be." A deep silence followed, while he gazed contemplatively over the housetops at the red of the setting sun. For an hour we waited without speaking, but he remained silent, never relaxing his far-off gaze, and one by one we crept away, fearing to disturb his reverie. The next night we came again, and again he spoke, but once only.

"Commerce is the soul's meanness; by toil we are lost." We absorbed this while the Master smoked our cigarettes, and on our way back through the night we whispered the phrase, preserving the flavour to the palate of our intellects. Once more we visited him, and again he bestowed a gem from his mind's treasury. "The love-glance of a woman crystallises the blood." Thereat we much marvelled, and gazed inquiringly, hoping for an elucidation of the text, but the She of his immortal dreams was made no more apparent to us—the Oracle did not even sigh.

He borrowed shillings of us in a calm and dispassionate manner which excited our greatest admiration. We gloried in his humility, and vied with each other as to who should proffer the loans, and were hurt if he partially distributed his august favours. We remember with gratitude that he never wounded our feelings by making the slightest attempt to repay them; not that he considered wealth unimportant, for, said he, "Money is the bridge of the Abyss." He detested haste, his movements having the very grace of deliberateness. To see him saunter round to our lodgings at the time of the midday meal was a revelation.

That night he was prodigal of wisdom, and we learned that "Original sin came not from the woman, but her mother." His benediction uplifted us. "Woman is the world's message; he who walks may read"; and again: "A child is the sum-total of human possibility."

Looking back, we remember he was most striking in the sunset of his

career, when the night was falling and the shadows were about him, folding him as with a garment. In the full glory of his radiant youth he passed from us, bequeathing the glad memory of his gracious ways. Truly, in his own words, "Forgetfulness is the triumph of Time."

He was standing oracularly by the fire, and had paused to give utterance to some impressive truth, which, alas ! is lost to the world, when the door suddenly opened and a terrible female entered. She was large and appalling, her bonnet was awry, her face was square without the corners, and was flaming red, her eyes cast glances that blighted where they fell. One hand grasped a gigantic umbrella, the other was extended with an air of menace. To our everlasting shame be it recorded, we never made the least attempt to save the Master ; we only saw him borne from our midst with paralysing speed. As he disappeared through the doorway, dragged in the clutches of the Fury, he turned his face toward us—in his eyes a mute appeal.

We know not where he went, but we very much know how. When consciousness returned to us he was gone, but a new Presence remained—an odour, pungent and characteristic, diffused throughout the room. It was not new to our nostrils, living in a city of inns.



THE REASON OF SUCCESS.

If you know a man making a roaring success
At a thing you can't try without making a mess—
Which is sad ;
If he does quite a number of things that you can't,
You must go and explain to your favourite aunt
That he's mad.

If he works all day long, and well into the night,
And starts again early as soon as it's light—
While you're lazy ;
Excelling you too in the size of his brain—
And using it better as well—why, it's plain
That he's crazy.

If he writes a good drama that hasn't a flaw,
That's a good one to read and a good one to draw,
And to act ;
A play that is better than taking or clever—
A play that's remembered for ever and ever—
Then he's cracked.

If he sings a song well from the back of his throat,
And gets a big puff from a critic of note,
Whom the tune struck ;
And keeps on improving till managers fight
To offer him hundreds for one song a night—
Why, he's moonstruck.

If he paints a great picture or writes a great book,
Or gets to the summit by hook or by crook
Of his craft ;
If he fights to a place with the fortunate few,
And shows himself better and smarter than you—
Why, he's daft.